

The Wondrous Years

How to know when you need help

By Susan Cedar, M.C., C.P.C.

Parenting is a unique, intimate, ever changing, lifelong relationship. We start out drawing upon all our tender, nurturing impulses and add layers of skill and understanding as our children grow. As children reach toddler-hood, we learn to set limits and stand by, encouraging their efforts to be autonomous. As they get older, we learn to help them control impulses and make choices, anticipate consequences and resolve conflicts.

From the time we begin caring for our children, we also dialogue with our larger culture, prioritizing our concerns, planning for our children's success, laying a ground-work for their acquisition of moral values and avoidance of risky behaviors. This all occurs while we reference our own childhoods and life stories. As our children age we remember ourselves at that age and what was said about us. We remember our parents and how they dealt with us. We also relive feelings of contentment and frustration, excitement, jealousy, anger and shame.

Healthy parents have a continuum of support strategies that sustain them through the challenges created by their children's development, the pressures of the larger culture and remembrance of things past. They are honest about the difficulty of sorting through their parenting feelings, reactions and decisions, whether they are single or building a partnership with another parent who is doing the same thing.

All parents should have people they talk to regularly about what's happening in their family. It's important to share feelings, small worries, successes and issues you're trying to decide about – like when to start piano lessons or whether to use karate as a way to teach impulse control. It's also important for parents to have routines for re-energizing and getting away for a time by taking classes, exercising, listening to music, socializing, reading, or trading off children with another family to take turns shopping.

When parents first feel stuck with a thorny issue, a good first step can be referring to a book with developmental guidelines. Sometimes reading about

ages and stages for social, emotional, cognitive or moral development helps anchor parents in the here and now of their child's needs or behaviors. Also helpful are books and magazine articles dealing with parenting strategies such as positive discipline or self-esteem building.

But even with a support system and time-off routines in place and a library of relevant parenting books at home, sometimes parents cry, scream with frustration, worry about a child, struggle with a decision and fail to reach a resolution; argue repeatedly with a partner about what's best for a child or feel exhausted and overwhelmed about a recurring problem. These are times when focused outside help from a pediatrician, preschool teacher, parenting class or parenting group can make a difference.

Seeing a mental health counselor or family counselor also can help. You don't need to have a psychiatric disorder to consult a counselor about an ongoing, painful situation with a young child or a confusion of yours that won't fade. When parents have had difficult childhoods, they sometimes feel they don't have a model to emulate. Counselors can help adults develop a parenting repertoire and find their confidence.

New parents often plan to do things exactly the way their parents did or else to do the exact opposite. Either way, their strategy is about re-parenting themselves and isn't responsive to the needs of their child. Parents in this situation need to rethink their responses and sometimes need help to create a different schema. Sometimes they need help to "see" their child and his or her needs in order to be a more successful parent.

Smart parents look for help in a variety of places and if they feel stuck they look deeper and wider. They look to friends and family, books, schools and teachers, churches and temples, parenting classes and groups, pediatricians, professional counselors and educational consultants and evaluators. Help is out there and your children will thank you for using it.

Susan Cedar, M.C., C.P.C., is founder of the Family School, a non-profit center in Central Phoenix providing education, prevention, intervention and support programs for a diverse population of Arizona families. She has successfully raised four children and she and her husband recently adopted Angela, 4 months.